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“Deciduous Magnolias for Early Color”

Want a splash of color during late winter when little else is blooming? If so, try the deciduous magnolias. Although the *Magnolia* genus encompasses about 80 species of trees and large shrubs, the deciduous species make up a special group.

This group is known for its spectacular display of flowers before leaves appear in early spring. Most that are seen in local landscapes are *Magnolia soulangiana* hybrids or selections. Depending upon the variety, colors range from white to pink to purple.

There are several varieties that are adapted to Northwest Florida. “Alexandria” has fragrant tulip-shaped flowers that are pink-purple on the outside and white on the inside. “Brozzonii” has pale pink flowers that are white inside. “Deep Purple Dream” has dark red-purple buds that open into a lighter shade. The flowers are bowl-shaped and the plant has a shrubby habit. “Grace McDade” produces large white flowers that are shaded with pinkish purple that appear about 2 weeks later than other cultivars. Over 100 different cultivars have been produced since the original cross was made, so there are many others from which to choose.

Locally, the deciduous magnolias are known by several names including saucer magnolias, Japanese magnolias, Oriental magnolias and even tulip trees. They are not actually tulip trees. This is a misnomer. They were probably given this common name because of the shape of the flowers. The true tulip tree is the tulip poplar, a large growing native tree with yellow flowers that appear in late spring. Saucer magnolia is probably the most accurate and widely used common name, though Japanese magnolia is used the most locally.

The skinny on saucer magnolias:

- They are all deciduous, meaning that they shed their leaves in the fall and grow new ones

the following spring, as opposed to the evergreen species like southern and sweetbay.

- Most grow as large shrubs, reaching a maximum height of about 15 feet in Florida.
- Best adapted to north Florida.
- Grow and flower best in full sun or high, shifting pine shade.
- Prefer moist, rich, well drained soil.
- Can be used in the landscape as a freestanding specimen or in shrubbery borders to provide seasonal color.
- Tolerate a wide soil pH range from acid to neutral, but slightly alkaline conditions are best for growth.
- Not salt tolerant and can be damaged even by winds containing salt spray in coastal locations.
- Easily damaged by excessively deep transplanting. Plant no deeper than the top of the root ball.
- Following transplanting, frequent watering is required for several weeks, or until well established.
- Although adaptable to clay, loam or sandy soils, these magnolias are not tolerant of excessively wet or poorly drained soils.

There is another species of deciduous magnolia that is more rarely found in landscapes, but should be mentioned. *Magnolia stellata*, commonly known as star magnolia, is a striking, robust shrub with large white flowers. It can grow to a height of 25 feet. The cultural requirements are the same as for the saucer magnolia.

Question of the Week: Is it too early to fertilize my lawn?

Answer: February is usually too early for a spring application of fertilizer. Our permanent lawn grasses such as centipede, St. Augustine, bermuda and zoysia haven't started growing yet. Wait until the soil and air temperatures have warmed up enough to cause grass growth to begin. March is plenty early enough for fertilizing.